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Contact: Robin Winchell (202) 225-4031

HOUMA - U.S. Rep. Charlie Melancon today was honored by the Louisiana Health Access Network for helping to make prescription drug coverage more affordable for seniors. Approximately 88 percent of Louisiana's Medicare beneficiaries now have prescription drug coverage, 334,600 of these having gained new coverage through Medicare Part D, according to final-enrollment numbers recently released by the federal government.

"One of our greatest healthcare challenges as a nation is to ensure senior citizens can afford the prescription drugs they so critically need," said Melancon. **"My staff and I have been hard at work helping seniors register for the Medicare prescription drug benefit. There is still much work to be done, but I am proud so many of Louisiana's seniors now have prescription drug coverage."**

The Louisiana Health Access Network and the Louisiana Women's Network, a non-profit collaborative of more than 800 grassroots and healthcare organizations in the state, credit the leadership of Louisiana's congressional delegation, particularly Congressman Melancon, as a big part of the reason why enrollment has exceeded expectations.

Cheron Brylski of the Louisiana Women's Network said, **"Congressmen like Representative Melancon have helped us get this word out through health fairs across the state. We are so grateful."**

As the Third Congressional District's Representative in Congress, Melancon has co-sponsored several bills to improve access to affordable drugs under the Medicare Part D program. Melancon co-sponsored the Medicare Informed Choice Act of 2005 (HR 3861), which would have extended open enrollment for Medicare Part D through 2006 without penalty and allowed a one time prescription plan change in 2006. This legislation would also have protected seniors from losing their employee-based retiree health coverage upon enrollment in Part D during 2006.

Melancon also co-sponsored legislation to provide additional funding for state health insurance counseling programs for Medicare Part D enrollment (HR 4737).

He co-sponsored the Medicare's Equitable Drugs for Seniors Act of 2005 (HR 376), which would have helped ensure that seniors enrolled in Medicare Advantage and Medicare Part D prescription drug plans pay the lowest possible price for prescriptions by authorizing the Secretary of Health and Human Services to negotiate contracts with drug providers, much like the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, Secretary of Defense, and the heads of other federal agencies do.

Of Louisiana's approximately 615,209 Medicare beneficiaries, 542,849 have drug coverage, and a subset of 334,600 of those covered have a new Medicare Part D stand-alone prescription drug plan or Medicare managed care plan. Moreover, after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, more than \$150 million in free medicines were distributed to people of all ages, with the help of congressional offices.

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